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JERUSALEM – THE LODESTONE OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Abstract: The paper discusses the issues of Jerusalem as a lodestone of identity politics. Unlike its moniker as the city of peace, Jerusalem's history is one of intolerance, violence, and the tumbling of walls. The idea of Jerusalem took precedence over its complex and multifaceted history, as well as its current reality. From the author's the point of view until and unless this cult mindset is softened, there will be no solutions to Jerusalem. If it is lessened, the solutions are many. The author comes to conclusion that the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the blockages over Jerusalem offer an opportunity to learn from mistakes and failure, and for our politics to evolve, even in the difficult Middle East. However, many would seem to wish to simply reiterate the failures of the past as long as it is their turn in the limelight, while both peoples remain destined to suffer, today and tomorrow.

Key words: Jerusalem, Middle East, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, identity politics

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ИЕРУСАЛИМ И ПОЛИТИКА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ

Аннотация: Статья посвящена осмыслению проблем, связанных с ролью и местом Иерусалима в политике, проводимой различными этноконфессиональными сообществами Ближнего Востока, по защите своей идентичности. В отличие от своего названия – «город мира», история Иерусалима – это скорее история нетерпимости и насилия. При этом именно идея Иерусалима доминирует и в его сложной и многогранной истории, и в его весьма непростой нынешней реальности. С точки зрения автора, до тех пор, пока это культовое мышление не будет преодолено, проблема Иерусалима не имеет решений. Автор приходит к выводу, что тупиковый характер израильско-палестинского противостояния дает возможность учиться на ошибках и неудачах, а также совершенствовать политические практики, применимые на сложном пространстве Ближнего Востока в целом. Однако заложниками этой неразрешимой ситуации остаются и палестинцы, и израильтяне.

Ключевые слова: Иерусалим, Ближний Восток, палестино-израильский конфликт, политика идентичности

In December 2017, President Trump's demonstrated once again the importance of Jerusalem as a political issue in the Middle East. His announcement of the move of the American Embassy to the city, recognizing it as Israel's capital, was a confirmation of his version of political reality, and an affront to decades of habits regarding a two-state solution. Trump 'the Disruptor' had struck again, the consequences of his actions, unknown and unpredictable.

Jerusalem, often dormant, sometimes for months, sometimes for centuries, awakens when a party uses its history and heritage for political purposes – a quintessentially Middle Eastern manoeuvre – a move committed since time immemorial, and one that does no little harm to the societies involved.

Trump's announcement was a knife in the back of Palestinian national ambitions, for Jerusalem is the lodestone of their aspirations. In 2016, there had been the Intifadah of the Knives, a popular, leaderless Palestinian movement against radical Jewish Israeli attempts to increase their presence on the disputed Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount holy site, which encompasses 1/6 of the 0.9 sq. kms of the walled Old City of Jerusalem. This is only the most recent of political tremors in the city, and, likely, many more are to come.

Why Jerusalem, and why does it matter?

Jerusalem resonates in the minds of believers across the world. Muslims, Christians and Jews grow up with it as part of their religious and cultural lore. It can linger like a pleasant thought or a memory but it is also a place of aspiration, the city on the hill, the place of crucifixion, night journey, and 'aliah, or ascent. It's all upwards in Jerusalem it seems, but its history speaks otherwise.

Unlike its moniker as the city of peace, Jerusalem's history is one of intolerance, violence, and the tumbling of walls. From the Crusades to today's oppression, the record is bloodcurdling. In between violent spasms, however, Jerusalem was also often a forgotten backwater. It's only when it becomes a cause celebre that anyone pays attention to it. With all that blood, the idea that it is holy seems, on the surface, nonsensical – or maybe the link between blood and the holy, the violent and the sacred, is closer than we think.

Ironically, whoever came to Jerusalem down the years always found it in the possession of another. When the Israelites first arrived the Jebusites were there; when Muslims arrived, Christians were there; when the Crusaders arrived, Muslims were there; and when Zionists arrived, Palestinians were there [1, p. 25].

However, this did not engender any respect for the other; instead, the attachments and assumptions have almost always prevailed over living beings¹. The *idea* of Jerusalem took precedence over its complex and multifaceted history, as well as its current reality.

The city matters today because it is a direct barrier to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, equally, its resonance is such that it can serve as symbolic fodder for a larger regional conflict. Hizballah and Iran celebrate Jerusalem Day as a point of vindictive memory against Israel's presence, and Iran's vaunted Al Quds force is named after the city.

There are certainly many arguments that Jerusalem no longer matters, that the devastation of Syria, the menace of ISIS and the greater geopolitics (Iran vs. Saudi Arabia et al) have overwhelmed the relevance of this peculiar city on a hill. However, as mentioned above, the city can lie dormant for years until it explodes, becoming a fulcrum for rallying a political cause. 1099, when the Crusaders took the city, and 1187, when Salladin liberated it from them, may seem far away. But, 1967, the year of Israeli conquest, is much closer, as is even its role in triggering the Crimean War of 1854, when fighting between Catholics and Christian Orthodox over holy sites triggered a geopolitical struggle.

¹ One memorable exception is Omar Ibn El Khattab, the Muslim conqueror of the city who refused to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for fear that it would then be turned into a mosque. He moved some 50 yards away to pray and there now stands a mosque in commemoration of his decision.

How can we attend to this religio-political lodestone, and what are the lessons that can be learned for the politics and conflicts of the Middle East today?

Jerusalem is the exemplar of how exclusive politics driven by identity, can wreak havoc, how supremacy over others cannot achieve stability, even when that supremacy is projected as a form of defense. The Middle East today is littered with this ignoble achievement of 'supremacy', from the clinging to power of minorities, or mafia groups, at the expense of whole populations, to obsessions over sites whether major, such as in Jerusalem, or minor like the small tomb on Sheikh Abbad Hill between Lebanon and Israel, claimed by Muslims to be that of a Sufi saint and by Jews, a rabbi.

The reality of Jerusalem is otherwise. It is three issues wrapped in one, yet people often ignore certain layers, emphasizing one over another, with consequences for its citizens, as well as for political harmony in the region.

1) The National Level: The most well-known current contention is over sovereign control over the city, Al Quds, traditionally East Jerusalem, as capital of Palestine, and Yerushalayim, however defined, as capital of Israel. The border between these two 'capitals' is the key dilemma: where does it lie?

International law and diplomatic tradition refer back to two UN resolutions, UNSCR 242 that declares that Israel should withdraw from territories occupied during the 1967 war, including East Jerusalem, formerly under Jordanian control. The second is UN resolution 181 in 1947 that defines the area of Jerusalem and beyond as a corpus separatum, a separate international entity from the surrounding two states of Israel and Palestine. However, the reality today, and increasingly since 1967, is that Israel controls all of Jerusalem and is building up Jewish settlements in what was once East Jerusalem. The activity is such as to make future negotiations more and more difficult as every day passes; one more housing unit on the east side means one more claim by Israel on what Palestinians believe is theirs.

Rumors that Trump's two-state initiative would offer the Palestinians the nearby town of Abu Dis as their capital, instead of East Jerusalem, will not satisfy Palestinian aspirations. Indeed, such a step also embarrasses Israel's erstwhile regional allies (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Jordan). None of them can claim to their people that the problem is resolved with Abu Dis as the capital of Palestine. Control over Jerusalem, defined through classical territorial sovereignty and the national symbolism that comes with it, lies at the core of any political negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, indeed between Israel and any of its neighbors.

2) The Religious Level: With its plenitude of holy sites, Jerusalem is a place of pilgrimage for the three monotheistic faiths, and a symbol in the hearts of minds of believers. From the Passover call of 'next year in Jerusalem' that accompanied Jews for centuries, to the images of the Dome of the Rock in offices from Rabat to Baghdad, the city represents lost glory that must be regained for whoever does not control it. It can also become simply a pilgrimage site for those, e.g. Christians, who no longer have such overarching political ambitions there, and who are content instead with bickering over the control of keys and ladders at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the very geographic heart of the Christian faith.

This religious aspect is less problematic when it is simply a vague longing or a form of religious tourism; however, when the horse of politics is hitched to the wagon of faith, a heady brew can be created, impelling many to great acts of fervor and violence.

Al Quds force, Gush Emunim and who knows what future appellation all belong to that same strain of eager pursuit of the city, for God and nation. This emotional and symbolic power of the city is ignored at our peril.

3) The Municipal level: Last but not least, Jerusalem is a city with buildings, citizens, trams and sewers. Almost a million people live there, roughly divided between Arabs, secular Jews and religious Jews, although the latter are gaining in number and proportion, carrying that into municipal political power, and changing the character of the city. Today, it is not only Arabs who increasingly feel alien in the city; it is also secular Jews who prefer Tel Aviv's lighter ambiance.

This aspect of the city is the most easily ignored because it is the least political appealing, and the least able to rally numbers and forces. It is easier to marshal fighters for holy sites than for sewers. Ironically, increased Israeli occupation of the city has recently spurred some Arabs to finally take the fight locally. East Jerusalemites are increasingly open to fighting their cause at the municipal rather than national level, for property rights and services. Political aspirations and basic human needs will always find a channel of expression and manoeuvre.

No solution to Jerusalem can ignore any of the above levels of the city, but most do. The political, religious and local needs of Israelis, Palestinians, believers across the globe, and local residents need to be satisfied. This makes resolution for the city difficult, and at the heart of it lies a powerful marker of what plagues the Middle East in many places: the question and meaning of identity.

How has the city been dealt with politically?

The idea of a Corpus Separatum for Jerusalem attempted to satisfy all by placing the city in effective political limbo, belonging to none, except the United Nations, and, putatively, thus belonging to all. However, control, driven by identity and heritage has overwhelmed these more transcendental approaches. Instead, the rush for single and exclusive sovereign control is the hallmark of our age (and of many of the troubles of the Middle East).

Even the theoretical two state solutions proposed have their shortfalls. For example, if the Haram Al Sharif falls under Palestinian sovereignty, Palestinians assure Jews and Israelis that their political control would not mean a denial of access for Jews to this holy site. However, destruction of Jewish sites and denial of access in the period 1948-67, under Jordanian control, does not help assuage Jewish fears. More importantly, nothing succeeds like success, and Israeli control over the city today, and a consequent unwillingness to share it, recollects that old proverb (often linked to the Middle East), "if I am ahead, why should I compromise?", and its difficult twin, "if I'm behind, how can I compromise?" Both sides see their heritage defined into politics, and into exclusive control, automatically creating a problem for the other.

There have been new attempts at finding solutions that meet the needs of all in fair-ways, and that attempt to address all levels of the city. One such effort is the Jerusalem Old City Initiative at the University of Windsor, Canada, (JOCI) in which I was a co-Director.

JOCI focused on the walled Old City only, given the symbolic importance of the holy sites contained therein. The decision to limit the concept to the Old City was a recogni-

tion that both sides required Jerusalem as a national capital, and would not necessitate a large role for a third party in other aspects of managing the city. As well, this option took advantage of the natural limits and security of the Old City's walls, while still addressing the key holy sites, including and especially the Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount.

Its premise was that, if the question of Jerusalem is to be broached in future negotiations, the answers will range between a strict division of sovereignty between the two states, Israel and Palestine, to a total internationalization of the city, which, at this point, is unrealistic. There are many options in between, and many accept that some third party engagement is necessary and to the benefit of a city as complex as Jerusalem. The debate is over the nature, extent, and scope of an international role. Even the Geneva Accord, which proposes a sovereignty split of the Old City provides for an international management system for the Haram al Sharif/Temple Mount and an international "Implementation and Verification Group" to oversee the implementation of the overall deal. Others have suggested joint Israeli-Palestinian control in Jerusalem, instead of an international role, for certain functions and areas.

JOCI developed the idea of a Special Regime, with third party presence and function, for the Old City with the intention of finding a solution that met the national ambitions of both Palestinians and Israelis as well as the needs of all believers who sought access to the many holy sites. This involves a "special" governance structure in the Old City of Jerusalem, i.e. one beyond national jurisdiction, in which a third party is mandated with the management of key functions including security and archeology and heritage issues for the sake of maintaining peace.

As indicated above, the JOCI Special Regime is not the first attempt to introduce an international element into the governance of Jerusalem. The "Corpus Separatum", and Adnan Abu-Odeh's 1992 article in Foreign Affairs that suggested internationalizing the Old City preceded it.

The great strength of JOCI is in detailing what such a third party role can look like at a robust and comprehensive level. JOCI describes what functions a third party can take on, and what degree of control is required for each function. Care was taken to consider the needs of all sides, to meeting them in a balanced way, while maintaining functionality and effectiveness of the third party presence. The JOCI Special Regime calls for a robust role for a third party in certain areas, which may also be useful to negotiators as it is easier to 'claw back' from this level of third party role rather than work up to it.

One of the strengths of this initiative, and also a source of criticism, is that JOCI did not tackle the question of sovereignty. This was a decision based on the view that this was for national negotiators to decide, given the profound sense of historical attachment on both sides. The Special Regime is 'sovereignty-neutral' and could be applied under conditions of agreement on sovereignty or not. Some have argued that there would be no need for a Special Regime if there were agreement on a sovereignty split in the Old City. However, the critical third party role may still be required to maintain peace and stability.

It is very possible that, in any upcoming two-state negotiations, agreement may be found on a border between Israel and Palestine everywhere but in Jerusalem. The temptation may be there to utilize the Special Regime or special arrangements as a stop gap in such a temporary circumstance; however, the reality is that, without a final status deal, such

arrangements would effectively be created under remaining Israeli control of the city. The Special Regime is designed for a final status agreement between the two sides and presumes a division, hard or soft, between the two capitals ‘Al Quds’ and ‘Yerushalayim’ [5, p. 284].

A version of the Special Regime was indeed proposed by Ehud Olmert to Mahmoud Abbas in 2008. Those talks did not go anywhere; however, it may well also be the case that even JOCI’s rational and functional approach does not attend sufficiently to the profound attachments that both sides had to the sites and the city, and their links to identity, and the way these matters then link up to political demands.

This factor, often and unsuccessfully framed as political sovereignty over the holy sites, is the fundamental apparently intractable problem, or at least one of the major ones preventing resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both parties wish to control and possess what they value, and even more so what they value in a sacred fashion – an irresolvable pie to be divided.

The reality however may be beyond carving, cutting, and defining borders. A city powerfully linked to three faiths, with the divine coincidence of one major holy site, the Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount, of great importance to two of them, does not lend itself to classical interest-driven political trade-offs. Despite the real estate wizard in the White House, a real estate deal won’t cut it in Jerusalem. Once identity is politicized in the Middle East, and especially once religion is introduced into the equation, it means that trade-offs are tricky, if not impossible. Many in the region prefer to have control and not their enemy rather than a solution that satisfies all to some degree.

The work of Jeremy Ginges, professor at the New School for Social Research in New York, and Scott Atran, anthropologist on ‘sacred values’ offer us some further understanding. Ginges carried out research showing how we process different values in distinct parts of our brain. “These include what he labelled “sacred values” – ones that we don’t wish to put on the bargaining table. “Attempts to trade them backfire and may cause the sides to be infuriated and dig in”².

Ginges and Atran explain that sacred values are not fundamentally negotiable, instead they must be recognized and not simply traded, a difficult political act, yet one which could potentially produce surprising results. Anthropologists and psychologists have found that basic needs not only cannot be ignored, but they are also not ‘tradeable’, as in a market place. They need to be satisfied in and of themselves. This may well be the case for the attachments of both peoples to Jerusalem and its holy sites, offering us a window on future political innovation that we are unused to today [2].

There are several studies that demonstrate that this may be the way forward, and that progress can be made in that regard. Atran and Ginges have indicated that extremists, groups on both sides who give heavy weight to symbolic and sacred values, are more likely to accept deals where the enemy makes symbolic but difficult gestures. Meanwhile, transactional, business-like negotiations favored by the West will backfire. Progress on these sacred values could lead to talks on more material issues, not the other way around. This is tough ground, but, as some large scale surveys have shown, if Palestinians can ac-

² The unofficial Geneva Accords effectively traded off Israeli sovereignty on the Temple Mount for the Palestinian Right of Return, both important intangible issues and received much criticism from both sides for doing so.

knowledge the Holocaust as a source of victimization for Israeli Jews, Israelis are readier to accept responsibility for Palestinian suffering [6]. As long as issues in the Middle East are dealt with through the lens of control and power, and their binding links to identity, there will likely be little progress. Attention to sacred values first may be a window onto new solutions; the problem lies in the very way we think about these things. A zero sum game cannot lead to a resolution over such significant matters for both peoples.

It might also be valuable to understand the logic that is behind possessive and exclusive mindsets. The unholy marriage of politics and religion needs to be looked at. One window is the work of Dr. Arthur Deikman, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco. He provides us with an invaluable paradigm for thinking about this conundrum, and explains in one word how vulnerable all can be to destructive thinking: cult.

In “Them and Us: cult thinking and the terrorist threat” Deikman explains how cult behaviour is part and parcel of our humanity, and how we all partake in it [2]. It does not, as is usually believed, only involve strange robes or purple cool aid drinkers in Guyana; it is far more pervasive. It can explain trouble between tribes, and even between nations.

The astute doctor identified four main characteristics of cults:

1. Dependence on a leader or obeying blindly what an authority tells us, fearing his or her judgments.
2. Avoiding dissent within the group.
3. Diminished realism, or ignoring inconvenient information.
4. Devaluing the outside.

The paradigm of cult behavior can help us understand the case of Jerusalem, the faiths involved, and attitudes towards the holy sites. By proposing a privileged link to God, religious authorities can encourage the strictest and most powerful form of cult behavior. God’s representative on earth, whether son, prophet, text or a chosen people, will be the upper pole of the cult/identity axis, going infinitely high. Because God is seen as the ultimate authority figure, religions run the inherent risk of becoming the ‘ultimate cults’, and of developing the *ultimate* devaluation of the outsider.

When such cultish religious ideas are combined with modern technology and ideology, perfect organizations of destruction can be developed. In a sense, extremists are the supreme cult artists, ready to kill anyone not following their agenda. This is also what makes terror groups like ISIS tragically functional: close off reality, obey, and act with an enthusiastic blindness. From Israeli settlers’ treatment of Palestinians, to Sunni extremists’ attempt to annihilate Yezidis, devaluation is at play.

Cult behaviour is a powerful motivator for in-group cohesion and motivation, and it can improve the chances of the group achieving its ends, but it also blinds. Most importantly, it makes us feel superior to the world outside and the people in it - and the battle for Jerusalem and its holy sites continues forever.

Deikman’s explanations and the concept of ‘sacred values’ are a window on to causes of political failure. JOCI project failed for two reasons. The first is that the politicians involved were not ready for compromise, in general, not just over Jerusalem. However,

the deeper reason is that it did not attend to the core attachments to the key site in the Old City, the Haram Al Sharif/Temple Mount, not consider the powerful emotions elicited by the cult mind and sacred values. Instead, it skirted around them. As Ginges and Atran suggest, the answers may lie elsewhere. As practical Canadian policymakers, we did not tread into these critical waters. It is, however, likely in this space where they may be progress in the future on this issue.

Our old political paradigms have not worked regarding the issue of Jerusalem, and the city is a lesson in dealing with the Middle East more generally. Managing the labyrinth of fickle interests, individual, collective and political, is not just a moveable feast for the manipulative, it's a mess from which extraction is very difficult. It is a morass that we simply sink in, as we now see many times over in almost every country in the region, and between them.

Is there a different way of thinking about politics? Can Jerusalem inspire such an attitude and what does it look like?

Its complexity of Jerusalem should point to the need for greater simplicity, for a different starting point. The learning may be in a space that in fact the various groups and their competing interests share, a hidden common ground between them.

The American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has identified universal moral 'taste receptors' that all human beings, across all cultures, share. These include care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation [4, p. 146]. According to Haidt, all cultures value these in varying degrees, emphasizing these values if you wish, depending on historical development and geographic needs. However, we do not enjoy anything beyond this limited set – we share the lot.

Even if some prefer or need certain receptors more than others, depending on culture, history and geography, the fact that these cover a universal spectrum means they are common ground. None can be denied by another, even if there is difference of emphasis between nations and cultures.

In the case of Jerusalem, all - Palestinians, Israelis, Jews, Muslims and Christians – can see that they share and put value on the sacred; they share that receptor. If there is a solution to Jerusalem and its holy sites that can satisfy the national sentiments of both peoples, believers across the world, as well as the residents of the city, then the blockages created by political identity fired up by religion will need to be dissolved, or at least seen in another way: as part of shared set of human characteristics, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Muslims all put value on sanctity.

However, we all share a tendency towards cult behavior, as well as Haidt's moral taste receptors. This pitfall is also likely universal and explains the exclusive mind that devalues someone from outside our cult. The struggle between seeing that we are both universal (Haidt's receptors and values) and tribal (cult behavior) will always be with us. However, the answers do not lie in the poles and extremes (only cult or abstractedly universal) but in the middle where all the factors need to be weighed sensibly, not ignored. Unmitigated and not understood, they can lead us to blindness and narrow and fixated thinking that can in no way permit the broader view required for more creative solutions. Viewed as part of the package of being human that we all share, they can begin a process of seeing the limits and traps of identity – and of sacred values – that can possibly lead to solution.

In the case of Jerusalem, this necessarily involves recognition of the core needs and attachments to holy sites in themselves, not as trade-offs, and without political implication - that can come second. Such recognition by both sides would need to be mutual and simultaneous to liberate both peoples from the distrust that has developed over history, and that insists that the other moves first.

Recognition of the Jewish link to the Temple Mount and the Jewish presence in the Middle East (and today in Israel) combined with the Palestinians' need and rights for a coherent state as well as their religious links to the Haram Al Sharif can be the beginning, the foundation stone of more detailed negotiations between the two sides. From there, solutions to Jerusalem can be many, including a capital of two states in a confederation, joint management of the holy sites, a joint municipality or indeed forms of special regimes or special arrangements that introduce a constructive and accepted role for third parties in the city, building on its international status and its heritage that speaks across continents.

Conclusion

As long as the three levels of the city – national, religious and municipal – are ultimately attended to, the needs of all will be satisfied and there should be little cause for conflict. However, this process must begin with the best and most useful starting point, one that goes to the heart of the matter and recognizes that sacred values must be attended to, and the people that hold them calmed, rather than ignored.

What lies today directly in the way of doing so is exclusive mindsets and assumptions about the supremacy of one group over another, the cult mind. Until and unless this cult mindset is softened, there will be no solutions to Jerusalem. If it is lessened, the solutions are many.

The intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the blockages over Jerusalem offer an opportunity to learn from mistakes and failure, and for our politics to evolve, even in the difficult Middle East. However, whoever said there should be any learning in politics anyway? Many would seem to wish to simply reiterate the failures of the past as long as it is their turn in the limelight, while both peoples remain destined to suffer, today and tomorrow.

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